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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EUN](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: TURKEY'S EU STRATEGY: END OR MEANS?

REF: A. ANKARA 341  
[1](#)B. ANKARA 298

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Boasting a major economy and an established democracy, Turkey is unlike any other country that has previously sought EU membership. Accordingly, Ankara has faced a unique set of challenges since launching its EU accession negotiations, many of its own making. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in 2002 largely due to support from the pro-EU, pro-reform business community and urban middle class. Since 2005, however, the AKP-led GOT has lost focus -- distracted by contentious nation-wide local elections and other challenges to its reform efforts. The Turkish bureaucracy has slowly chipped away at technical accession requirements which has allowed for the opening of 11 *acquis* chapters. Having eliminated all the low-hanging fruit, it is now a make or break point for Turkey's EU ambitions. GOT leadership must throw its weight behind controversial judicial and constitutional reforms as well as demonstrate a commitment to fulfilling the Ankara Protocol by opening its ports to EU-member Cyprus if Turkey is to avoid suspension of its EU bid this fall. Despite Ankara's own failings, the GOT contends the EU has not lived up to its end of the bargain, by allowing Sarkozy and others to hijack the EU platform and by failing to end the isolation of Turkish Cypriots. Given this paradigm, many here suggest Turkey may ultimately choose to stop the EU process short of membership, thereby benefiting from the reform process but avoiding surrendering its sovereignty to an increasingly fractured, consensus-based EU apparatus. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Turkey has faced a unique set of problems -- many of its own making -- since launching EU accession negotiations in October 2005. For the EU, Turkey represents an unprecedented ideological, demographic, and economic challenge. Religious concerns aside, Turkey's population would be second in magnitude only to Germany and represents roughly 75 percent of the combined total of the last 12 countries to become members. Turkey's GDP is over 50 percent of that same group and \$200 billion more than its largest single economy, Poland. In addition to standard *acquis* requirements, Turkey has separate provisions laid out in the 2005 Ankara Protocol reflecting the GOT's refusal to open Turkish ports to Cypriot vessels as mandated under the European Customs Union. This has resulted in the freezing of eight *acquis* chapters and the prohibition of any chapter being closed. Cyprus, France, Germany, and Austria are holding an additional ten additional chapters in unofficial abeyance as a reflection of their own domestic concerns.

Despite these external challenges, Turkey's focus on its candidacy primarily waxes and wanes depending on its own political climate.

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#### Turkey's EU Attention Deficit Disorder

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¶3. (C) The Islamist-rooted AKP came to power in 2002 largely due its pro-EU, pro-reform platform, which appealed to Turkey's secular business community and urban middle class. During its first three years in office, the AKP-led GOT worked hard to institute the political and economic changes required by the Copenhagen criteria to officially begin accession negotiations in 2005. In the years following, however, the AKP faced a series of domestic distractions including contentious nation-wide local elections and other challenges to its reform efforts, most notably a failed party closure case instituted by "Kemalists" claiming that the AKP was attempting to Islamicize the secular state. (Arguably, these Kemalists, so called due to their identification with founder of the modern Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his policies, also viewed the AKP equally as a challenge to their entrenched and lucrative positions and perks.) The Turkish bureaucracy's progress on the technical level has allowed the EU to open 11 politically-benign chapters since ¶2005. Having exhausted all the low hanging fruit and facing two years without another nation-wide election, the administration must now decide if it is willing to expend the political capital necessary to take on the controversial reforms required to keep Turkey's already sluggish EU momentum from coming to a screeching halt later this year when the EU reviews Turkey's progress with a special eye to the Ankara Protocol.

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#### Misnomer of Negotiations

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¶4. (C) European Commission and EU-member nation officials have conveyed to us that one of the greatest impediments to Turkey's success is the failure of Turkish officials and the public to understand that the accession process is not a negotiation, and that the *acquis* is to be adopted as prescribed. One European diplomat lamented that many GOT officials view it as a competition; whenever a chapter is opened, Turkey behaves as if it somehow "pulled one over" on Brussels. Furthermore, as the Ankara Protocol has prevented the closure of chapters, the political focus is only on opening new ones. GOT officials are so focused on the act of checking the box that the requirements themselves are frequently overlooked. This has also effectively halted political support for working toward meeting benchmarks in chapters that are already open.

¶5. (C) European Commission officials here have frequently noted that the GOT has a fondness for justifying new legislation as necessary for EU harmonization without checking with the EU as to whether the law actually achieves that goal. A UK diplomat explained that the Turkish Parliament had pushed through public procurement legislation without consulting the European Commission delegation. The subsequent law in no way complied with EU standards or met the requirements for opening Chapter 5 (public procurement). Still, politicians are now reluctant to go back and clean up their mess. She added that the Turkish Parliament is dangerously close to repeating the same mistake with its draft labor law required to open Chapter 19 (social policy and employment).

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#### A Failure to Sell

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¶6. (C) Turkish leaders have done a poor job of educating the Turkish public on the EU and the accession process. Politicians rarely discuss EU merits in their comments to the Turkish people, but instead choose to repeat one of three

populist themes: Europe needs Turkey; Turkey will not accept anything short of full membership; and the GOT is making reforms for the sake of Turkey, not the EU. Accordingly, Turkish public opinion for the EU reflects this less than complimentary tone. Polling numbers have shown a drop in the percentage of Turks who think EU membership is a good thing from 55 percent in Autumn 2005 to 42 percent in Autumn 2008. (NOTE: By Turkish standards, these are still very high polling numbers. END NOTE) The same poll demonstrated that the percentage of Turks believing that EU membership would benefit Turkey fell from 62 percent in Spring 2007 to 48 percent in Autumn 2008. This reflects a backlash against European leaders who are perceived as using the prospect of Turkish membership as a means of creating a "pan-European identity," overall public ignorance of the issues, and growing level of Turkish disinterest.

¶7. (C) Ankara has done an even worse job of selling its EU aspirations in Europe. For years, Turkish ambassadors in Brussels viewed their mission as strictly bilateral and had no desire to engage the EU or European Parliament. The MFA has only recently begun to alter this mindset. Over the last two years, the GOT has encouraged dialogue between the European and Turkish Parliaments, although a majority of the engagement efforts have originated in the private sector. Turkish businessmen's associations such as TUSIAD and TUSKON and Turkish think tanks brought over 300 European Parliament members to Turkey on private funded programs in 2008. In the beginning of 2009, however, the GOT took steps to enhance its high-level engagement ahead of what many believe is a "make or break" year. Immediately after naming AKP Vice Chairman Egemen Bagis to replace then-Foreign Minister Ali Babacan as State Minister for EU Affairs and lead EU negotiator (a move long advocated by the EU), PM Erdogan visited Brussels, January 18-20, for the first time in five years. Both Erdogan and President Gul have subsequently made several trips there to advocate for Turkey's EU membership -- with mixed reviews.

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Not All Turkey's Fault  
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¶8. (C) Some European officials here readily point out that Ankara alone cannot be blamed for the slow down in Turkey's accession process. The EU has consistently sent negative and mixed messages which have dampened Turkish enthusiasm. One Swedish diplomat noted that the EU has failed to explain to Turkey that France does not speak for the organization nor do all members share its or Germany's views. This duplicity reinforces a "vicious cycle" of European criticism followed by Turkish inaction, she noted. More importantly, most Turks believe the Ankara Protocol has provided Cyprus with an unfair weapon against Turkey in its ongoing bilateral dispute. While Turkey has not complied and opened its ports, the EU has not done enough to end the isolation of Northern Cypriots, something which is also called for in the Ankara Protocol. As a result, many Turks have come to view EU-justified reform efforts as futile so long as Cyprus can effectively halt the process with its one vote. (NOTE: While ratification of the Lisbon Treaty will ease many internal EU disputes and allow for greater discussion of issues related to enlargement, European officials tell us that decisions related to new membership will still require consensus. END NOTE)

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All Politics Are Local  
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¶9. (C) Turkey's skeptical attitude toward the EU reflects a larger insecurity about its place in Europe and a perceived lack of European will to accept Turkey as European. Turks commonly refer to this fear as the "Sevres Syndrome" in reference to the 1920 treaty in which France, the UK, Italy, and Greece carved up the former Ottoman Empire. At best, Turks perceive a general lack of European political will to incorporate Turkey's large economy and population. At worst,

the public fears that this hesitance is due to religious and ethnic prejudices. Regardless, the process of subjecting the substantive spectrum of Turkish governance to European scrutiny touches upon many domestic sensitivities and calls for a level of humility not commonly found here. Politicians, nevertheless, are keenly aware that EU membership has different meanings to different constituency groups and alter their message accordingly.

¶10. (C) While being a vocal EU proponent may not win votes in Turkey, politicians understand being an outright opponent will lose them. Each constituency group, however, views EU accession through the guise of its own domestic agenda. The Islamists, closely associated with the ruling AKP, see the EU as a proxy for reforming a secularist system that has traditionally suppressed Islamic parties and their supporters, namely changing party closure laws as required by the Venice Commission and eliminating headscarf prohibitions.

On the alternative end of the political spectrum, the secular social and political elite Kemalists, represented by the leading opposition party CHP, desire an inseverable tether for Turkey to Europe that would guarantee its westward orientation. The Kemalists are torn between achieving their goal of a European Turkey and, on the other hand, complying with EU reforms that grant greater social and political freedoms to the Islamists, who they believe have the agenda of turning Turkey into a sharia state. In addition, many of the required EU judicial and constitutional reforms simultaneously touch upon core political redlines of the Kemalists and Islamists and have met with resistance from both sides. To the Turkish business community, regardless of political affiliation, the EU represents economic opportunities.

¶11. (C) The urban middle class sees EU membership as economic security and easier travel to Europe -- as one journalist described it, "a European-style life." Having once voted for AKP due to its pro-EU, pro-reform platform, this group abandoned the party in the March nationwide municipal and local elections. For the nationalists, EU membership is, on one hand, the ultimate validation of Ataturk's modernization and Westernization project, but on the other, a surrender of autonomy and the subjugation of Turkish needs to greater European concerns. The average Turk, however, knows little of the EU other than what is said by politicians. Accordingly, Turkish media coverage of critical statements coming from European capitals represents much of the Turkish street's exposure to Brussels. In a recent nation-wide poll on intolerance, respondents selected the EU over Israel, terrorists, and the U.S. as the greatest threat to global security. Fatigued by the onslaught of sound bites from Sarkozy and Merkel, and the seemingly endless demands for controversial and laborious reforms, the average Turk has grown ambivalent to the accession process.

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Whither Turkey  
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¶12. (C) Contrary to popular perception, however, Turkey's EU efforts have not completely stalled since 2005. Beginning in 2008, the GOT implemented a series of actions addressing several controversial human rights issues including Article 301, the Foundations Law, and state-owned Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) Kurdish language broadcasting, in addition to passing a much welcomed National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis and naming a new lead EU negotiator. One UK diplomat noted several steps that have done much to win European hearts and minds, such as making May 1 an official holiday and allowing peaceful labor protests, the uneventful celebration of Nevruz, PM Erdogan and President Gul's trips to Brussels, and the nascent steps to normalize relations with Armenia.

¶13. (C) On the heels of a weak Czech presidency, Ankara is optimistic that their EU luck will improve with the back-to-back pro-Turkey Swedish and Spanish terms. Nevertheless, Turkey faces a difficult six months ahead. The

GOT has yet to institute significant judicial and constitutional reforms (both of which touch upon hard-fast secularist red lines) ahead of the parliament's summer recess. Without a significant push in those areas and without opening its ports to Cyprus, Turkey faces the possible suspension of its accession talks in the late-fall following the annual progress report.

¶14. (C) In June, EU Enlargement Commissioner Ollie Rehn encouraged Turkey to take bold measures to avoid suspension of talks, specifically opening its ports to Cyprus, making progress in the reunification talks, recognizing the status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, and opening Halki Seminary. While European diplomats have qualified that Rehn's statement was intended to motivate Ankara to take action on all fronts, many Turks have interpreted his comments as a list of equally weighted options. Furthermore, some GOT officials have conveyed to us assurances from Brussels that the fall progress report will not lead to a derailment of talks. GOT officials have increasingly begun to imply that Halki will open in the near future, a move many interpret as a stop gap measure to buy Turkey time. (NOTE: Regardless of the political will, some in the administration are arguing that opening Halki will require legislative action. END NOTE)

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) Boasting a major economy and an established democracy, Turkey is unlike any other country that has previously sought EU membership. Accordingly, the accession process offers different returns, most benefiting Ankara's internal needs rather than economic development or political cohesion. Turkey's membership in the European Customs Union already affords a high level of economic integration including EU visa waivers for Turkish truck drivers, artists, and (soon) journalists. Given that Turkey's "immigration threat" to the EU stems predominantly from third country nationals, it is not inconceivable that at some point business and tourism visas may follow suit. If all Turkey's interests (domestic reform, economic access, and ease of travel) are met through existing associations and the acquis harmonization process, full membership may not offer much to Turkey. Depending on the party in power at the time, many here believe Turkey may ultimately choose to stop the process short of membership, thereby avoiding surrendering its sovereignty to what they see as an increasingly fractured, consensus-based EU apparatus.

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